

Book Review: Politics and the Emotions: The Affective Turn in Contemporary Political Studies

by Blog Admin

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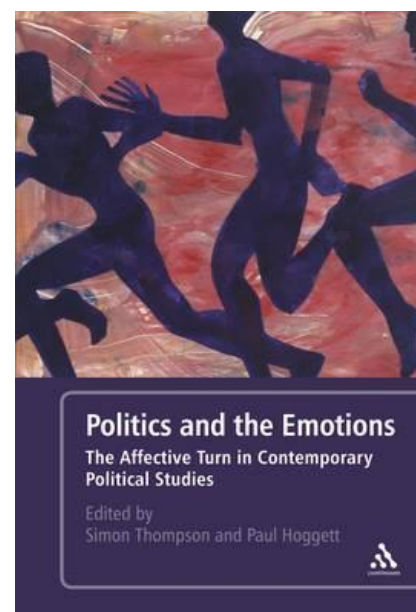
Politics and the Emotions is a unique collection of essays that reflects the affective turn in the analysis of today's political world. With contributions from scholars across Europe, US, and Australia, the book aims to advance the debate on the relationship between politics and the emotions. Considering themes such as antagonism and deliberation, the politics of fear, the affective dimension of political mobilization, each chapter includes a case study to demonstrate the application of concepts to practical issues. **Birgit Schippers** approves of the approaches and range of topics offered in this collection.



Politics and the Emotions: The Affective Turn in Contemporary Political Studies. Simon Thompson and Paul Hoggett. Continuum Books. May 2012.

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Bill Clinton's famous capacity to 'share your pain' has been widely regarded as the ability of an astute politician to connect with the emotional trials and tribulations of his voters. However, what the value of emotions to politics precisely is, and indeed, whether there is any value to be had at all, remains subject to much dispute. Those of a more cognitivist or rationalist bent, whether politician, political activist or ordinary citizen, may relate well to the aversion to emotion that still dominates the academic study of politics. Fortunately, a growing number of scholars recognize the significance of emotions within political studies, and Simon Thompson and Paul Hoggett's book *Politics and the Emotions: The Affective Turn in Contemporary Political Studies*, is a welcome addition to this scholarship.



In fact, both editors must be credited for their contribution to the study of emotions and politics, as both have published previously, both jointly and separately, on the subject. This latest collection of essays features an interesting and wide-ranging mix of topics covering the significance of emotions to democratic deliberation processes, the state's deployment of fear in the wake of 9/11, the affective display in social movements and political mobilization, as well as in-conflict and post-conflict scenarios, and, finally, the attempt to manage emotions in our therapeutic culture.

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The editors' introduction provides those new to the study of emotions with a useful map of the treatment, neglect and current revival of interest in the emotions in contemporary social science and humanities. However, as Thompson and Hoggett stress, while continental philosophy and sociology have been receptive to the scholarly treatment of emotions, political studies has until now been hostile to this topic. The key argument of this book and its contributions is that emotions, including anger and rage, love and hope, are constitutive features of politics, but that their value to politics is subject to much debate. Moreover, as the various chapters demonstrate, while we may recognise the importance of the study of emotions to politics in general, their specific uses, and their deployment in political context, vary considerably, with a wide range of effects on political actors.

This claim is demonstrated powerfully in Deborah B. Gould's contribution on 'Political Despair'. Her chapter is based on research conducted with AIDS activists in the [ACT UP movement](#) and their experience of

despair as the AIDS crisis evolved. She stresses one point in particular: that emotions and their effects are contingent, and that they cannot be utilised exclusively in the direction of a particular political objective. As she states, “the directionality of political feelings, where they take us, and the sorts of behaviour they motivate, cannot be established in an *a priori* fashion” (p. 108).

Gould’s assertion of the contingency of emotions is also highlighted in Mary Holmes’s essay on feminist mobilization in New Zealand. Whilst declaring her sympathy towards acknowledging the role of emotions in politics, she warns of a deterministic interpretation of their operation and functioning. As Holmes declares, “emotions are not inevitably subversive of the rational ordering of power” (p. 115). This claim is further illustrated in Scott Lucas’ work on the deployment of the emotion of fear by the state; it demonstrates that emotions may well be mobilised by states to shore up support for political goals with dubious aims, undercutting any prospect at political transformation.

What initially attracted me to this book was its promised focus on the study of emotions in political studies (its subtitle refers to ‘The Affective Turn in Contemporary Political Studies’). However, the focus on political studies is not achieved consistently throughout the book. Of course, this is not to suggest that the contributions do not have interesting and important things to say on the topic of emotions, and on the way that emotions pertain to politics and the political. In fact, most of them do. But the book missed an opportunity, in my view, to take a closer and critical look at the resistance to the study of emotions in political studies, and to highlight work that has already engaged with this topic in a more constructive way.

Tighter editing, both in terms of its focus on political studies, but also in relation to the approach and presentation pursued in some of the contributions, would have further improved this study. While all chapters are written in an engaging and accessible style that will appeal to a wide readership,

I remain unconvinced by the ‘broad brush’ approach and the sketchy sweep through a range of policy areas, peppered with anecdote, pursued in some of the contributions.

Of course, it is impossible to do justice to all contributions within the space of this review. For example, there are noteworthy contributions on the role of emotions in democratic deliberation processes that should attract interest from scholars and anyone involved in political decision-making processes. Thus, on balance I liked the approaches and range of topics offered in this collection. One would hope that future writings from the editors and contributors will continue to put the study of emotions firmly on the agenda of political studies.

Birgit Schippers is Senior Lecturer in Politics at St Mary’s University College Belfast, where she teaches modern and contemporary social and political theory. Her research interests focus on feminist theory, on citizenship and democratic theory, and on political theories of violence. She is the author of *Julia Kristeva and Feminist Thought* (Edinburgh University Press) and is currently completing a book on Judith Butler’s international political philosophy (Routledge, forthcoming). [Read more reviews by Birgit.](#)

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